



Ecological Feminist Study of Geetanjali Shree's Work, *Tomb of Sand*

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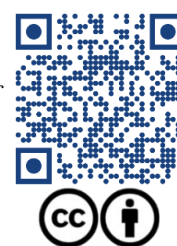
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Abstract— *Ecofeminism in the twenty-first century is emerging as a new discipline that has engaged scholars and activists to revisit and re-examine the relationship between humans and the natural world. It emerges as an interdisciplinary framework that links the oppression of women with the domination of nature. It argues that victimization of nature and women are similar to patriarchal, capitalist and colonialism structure by power. Emerging from the feminist and environmental movements, the theory challenges hierarchical systems and demands social justice. Therefore, the paper aims to analyze Geetanjali Shree's work, Tomb of Sand, with an ecofeminist sensitivity. Her narratives intricately weave women's experiences with broader socio-cultural and ecological concerns. While analyzing her work, the study engages with major ecofeminist theories, including the perspectives of Vandana Shiva. This paper draws the reader's attention to Shree's writing style that aligns with ecofeminist thought. The work questions how women and the environment become silent victims of capitalist and political ideology. It also interrogates the logic of domination that suppresses nature, women, and the environment. The study encourages readers to reconsider the power of belongingness and coexistence between ecology and human lives. The findings would also elaborate on gender discourse in reflection of the ecofeminist study.*



Keywords— *capitalism, ecofeminism, ecology, gender, nature, and women.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a concept that situates ecological studies within the framework of feminist issues. It is both a social and philosophical movement that links the exploitation of women to the exploitation of nature. As a theory, ecofeminism critiques social structures such as patriarchy, hierarchy, and systems of exploitation. These hierarchical structures not only dominate and oppress women but also degrade the environment and disrupt ecological cycles. Theorists like Carol J. Adams, Vandana Shiva, and Carolyn Marchant argue that capitalism represents a modified form of patriarchy. Ecofeminism recognizes that environmental justice is inextricably linked to gender justice.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian scholar, environmental theorist, and activist, underscores the importance of ecological balance and indigenous knowledge. Her ecofeminist perspective has been widely discussed globally. She

strongly advocates that ecofeminism as a theory would help in conserving and protecting the environment. She believes that there is a strong need to reform social norms to sustain the Earth. Shiva challenges the capitalist ideology of the modern world. She advocates that capitalism and globalism have advanced the colonization of land, air, and water. This act of colonization is leading to the suppression of women's identities and oppressing indigenous communities.

II. PATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE OVER NATURE AND WOMEN

Geetanjali Shree is one of the celebrated Indian women writers of the 21st century. She is known for using language as a main instrument to narrate a partition story. The partition story recounts trauma and fragmented memories of women and marginalized groups that have

impacted their physical and psychological well-being. The massive marginalization recorded only the voices of the privileged while ignoring the marginalized groups. Shree's *Tomb of Sand* not only analyzes "history" (394) but also gives voice to "herstory" (394). She creates space for the unheard, including nature, women, marginalized groups, and many more. She rejects or denounces social and cultural identities; rather, she identifies herself with the tree. She declares that "I am the Wishing Tree. I am the Kalpataru" (145). The metaphorical association with a tree symbolizes her growth, liberalization, and a new life in a constrained society. The tree metaphorically connects Ma to the living natural world.

The text challenges traditional gender differences and patriarchal structures while portraying the female body as a site of resistance and transformation. The study aims to explore the interconnectedness of women and nature in the text. The novel discusses the lasting impacts of displacement and survival by situating partition. Beyond these major discussions, it also explores the domination of non-human beings who are on the verge of loss due to globalization and capitalism. At the same time, it also highlights the suppression of women due to the same ruling power. As Shiva opines in her most prominent work, *Staying Alive* (1988), that patriarchy in modern times has become a "new scientific and technological power" (17) to produce the growth of a nation. In doing so, it has legitimized the "denudation of nature" (17), which is similar to the domination of women. She further clarifies that "Feminism as ecology, and ecology as the revival of Prakriti" (6) are seen to produce and reproduce growth in terms of "political and economic transformation and restructuring" (6) of modern society. Shiva identifies globalization as a new form of patriarchal domination, which not only captures female identity but also targets natural bodies through scientific ventures to fulfill human needs.

Likewise, Shree, in the novel, dedicates almost an entire chapter to the crow. The crows become symbolic as they mimic Ma's inner voice. Shree uses the crow meetings and their voices to illustrate the destruction caused by modernization. Modernization and globalization have created "horrific problems" (373) and a hazardous situation for the birds and wild animals. Shree highlights a global issue where birds are dying "due to climate change" (373). The survival of these birds and animals has become impossible due to poisonous air and rising temperatures. Globalization has changed men. Earlier, they were capturing female bodies, but now they are "interfering in the natural environment" (374). Shree attacks the "Swach Bharat campaign for a clean India" (375), in which gazette officers and government bodies participate to clean the

city. She makes a comparison that, on one side, the bureaucrats pollute the natural region while eroding it. On the other side, they campaign to clean India. The irony is that these bureaucrats and money-hungry individuals are the people who pollute the city and then try to clean it, posting their success stories on Google and Twitter. The event is organized to remind people not to disrespect nature but it ends up as a photo opportunity. Shree addresses such policies that have eroded natural mines and bio-diverse regions. The massive deforestation for experimentation is leading to the extinction of various species of flora and fauna.

Shree also attacks the modern world in which men have become self-centered. They have established chemical industries and modern infrastructure while destroying forest land and natural biodiversity. Shree questions the government, which place they belong to, and where these non-humans are "supposed to go when they fell our sky and our trees?" (215). They have no place left to survive. The massive deforestation has led to toxic air, and fertilizers have made the land barren. The infertile land has no power to regenerate. She addresses that the Earth and nature belong to every living creature, but men, to foster power, have created havoc for all the creatures. Their act of colonizing land, air, and water has destroyed the ecosystem and ecological cycle. She wonders where the homes of indigenous people, birds, and animals can be found. Shree raises the question from governing laws about how "wingless community is bent on destroying our home to build their own" (376). They legitimize their conduct as righteous using the law. Men tend to use their power to show supremacy over others by victimizing marginalized groups. Nature, which was earlier part of human life, is now regarded as "other". Poisonous air and water have not only harmed animals and nature but are also increasingly affecting human health, causing respiratory diseases and severely damaging human organs.

Furthermore, Shree in the novel criticizes climate change that has caused dry or late rain. The outlines that monsoon season no longer exist, even "The time when the raindrop will fall is no longer fixed" (121). The change in the ecological cycle has changed the monsoon season. Now the season "doesn't ensure rain" (353). The increase in temperature has destroyed climatic conditions. Rain, which earlier brought joy and happiness among humans and other living species, now brings chemical raindrops along with it. Now it does not carry fragrance and positivity, but carries the toxicity of polluted air and the achievements of mankind. The monsoon season has been massively affected by global warming. Shree warns readers that modernization is destroying humanity. Global warming has become one of the major concerns for the entire globe

as it is destroying the Earth. It is an alarming situation that glaciers are melting and seasons have become shorter due to the increase in temperature.

Shree organizes a series of narratives to attack government policies that have destroyed the environment for the fulfillment of the greed of mankind. The crow becomes the voice of the protagonists and asserts that human beings are spreading "pollution in the name of science" (371). Shree refers to the malpractices of the scientific experiments. As these experiments are highly impacting human health, especially victimizing women and children with "uncommon viruses" (516). Hospitals are crowded with unknown diseases that are difficult to cure. Hospitals also symbolize capitalist power by running tests and costly drugs that benefit owners and bureaucrats. They use bodies for experimentation. Shree criticizes all the malpractices of the government that hopes for better days. Like Shiva in *Staying Alive* criticizes "Maldevelopment militates against equality in diversity" (4) and issues like "scarcity of water, food, fodder and fuel, associated with increasing maldevelopment and ecological destruction" (5). Shiva further claims that nature and women in the modern world are "reduced to being 'resources' in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment" (5). Shree uses these critical aspects in her work to demonstrate how nature and women have become passive to males.

Shree's *Tomb of Sand* can also be praised for feminist concern, along with ecological issues. The narrative focuses on two women who are circumscribed outside the traditional sphere. The narrator in the novel, like Shiva, celebrates women's connection to nature. Shiva, in her most widely critiqued work *Staying Alive*, suggests that nature (Prakriti) is an "expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos" (37). Prakriti in the Global South is worshipped as Aditi. Readers of Shree's work find the connection between women and nature that helps the protagonist revive from her agonized sufferings. The paper highlights the cultural ecofeminist outlook of Vandana Shiva, in which she addresses nature as feminine and celebrates their conjugal relationship. Shree discusses the female struggle while viewing the protagonist in nature. She depicts eighty-year-old Ma as confident and bold, having married a man from another religion. Shree introduces Ma, who is "exhausted after years of subsuming her own rhythm to that of others, lying in bed for months" (224), like sand in a desert, which is considered lifeless. Sand personifies Ma's psychological trauma. Just like sand, women have hidden, silent experiences of their lifetime. Sand shows that it does not feel the effects of climate or the wild nature of human beings. Ma and sand both hold secrets within themselves. The traces of trauma of human destruction can be felt when Ma walks in the

sand, holding her past, as if she becomes the sand itself, mourning for her identity. Sand reflects the author's psychological transition from the voiceless to the voiced.

Like every other woman in Indian society, she served every member of her family without complaining, and with time, she forgot her aspirations. Similarly, Beti also marries of her own choice despite her family's disapproval. Shree asserts that women's "path opens with no. Freedom is made of no. No is fun. No is nonsensical. Nonsensical but also mystical" (52), criticizing that women's choices are not valued or prioritized in society. They are made to follow the path chosen by family members based on patriarchal values.

Shree, in the novel, interconnects nature and women's consciousness to depict women's suppression. In the second part of the novel, entitled "Sunlight" gives hope and aspiration to the protagonist. The sunlight symbolically gives growth and power to nature and also embraces the protagonist's soul. The prison walls personify not only being caged in the prison cell but also in patriarchal society. While she is in prison, she "planted a little garden, sown flowers" (660), which helped her regain herself. The garden's flowers, birds, air, and insects made her forget her wounded pain. Nature in prison gives her solace and hope for a better life. Women and nature here represent the colonization of their power by patriarchy. Shree attacks the colonization of land and women by drawing similarities in their victimization.

As Shiva, in her work *Ecofeminism* (2014), attacks the "masculinization of motherland" (108). The shift from motherland to a masculine view has created a global power hierarchy. Shiva states that such a view has caused "external borders disappear" (108) and has created "new, internal borders and boundaries" (108). This shift in worldview has broadened the gap between global and local identities. The novel clearly reminds the reader that borders are a reflection of the colonization of land. In the illustrated work, Shree questions how the earth beneath my feet was already a foreign land. She critiques how political powers use military and nuclear force to create borders. The author critiques the border as a symbol of supremacy, showing how power captures land.

Shree's protagonist Ma protests against her traditional roles. She claims that "A woman's body is the land upon which histories are written, but only if she permits them to be written" (220), which emphasizes female agency as a counterpoint to patriarchal control. The novelist empowers her protagonist to withdraw from passiveness and act as an active agent in transmitting intergenerational memory.

The body of land and the female body are always seen as the first sites to be captured and then stripped of their

rights. Shree, on the other hand, compares women's memories to rivers, which flow and carry pain. The river is considered fertile and full of life. Both rivers and women have the power to reproduce and sustain life. Water heals the tortured soul from the pain that history has imposed. As Ma points out, "Memories are not static. They are like rivers that reshape their course, finding new paths, carving new territories" (328). Shree compares bodies of water and land to the female body to depict how men have enslaved them to serve their own purposes.

The traumatic memories of partition have torn the protagonist's journey. Shree uses nature as a major tool to express her inner conflict. Readers find Ma seeking solace in nature while looking at the moonlight. She often gazes at it and speaks to it. This act becomes a form of escapism from the sorrow she has carried for years. Raindrops and moonlight cleanse her tormented soul. Shree expresses Ma's deep connection to nature.

During the winter season, "Amma got lost" (365), but she was found again in spring. Spring is considered the season of rebirth. It gives hope for life, unlike winter, which is seen as a season of death. The author celebrates spring as a season of renewal, giving hope to Ma. Shree writes that during spring, Ma's "heart trembles like a paper boat" (354) and "swings gaily on the sunlight and the moonlight and the raindrops" (354). These lines assert her desire to be free and independent. The raindrops, sunlight, and moonlight help her regain strength and heal emotionally and psychologically.

Readers also find Ma spending time with trees and plants, showering love on them. She blows "kisses at the plants" (357) and carefully touches "every leaf on every tree branch" (357). These actions depict her deep connection to nature. Shree connects both the reader and Ma to the natural world. Ma once again feels life within herself, forgetting her pain and loss. She begins conversing with nature, speaking to birds, squirrels, plants, and flowers. This act shows her understanding of the language of the ecosystem around her.

III. CONCLUSION

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* conveys the concept of nature as a healer of trauma, which can be closely related to ecofeminist thought that emphasizes the interconnectedness of women, nature, and healing. The sand is portrayed as a force that connects humans across time, symbolizing universal empathy for the transgressions of borders. From an ecofeminist perspective, this connection reflects what thinkers such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Carolyn Marchant describe as the shared histories of oppression experienced by women and nature

under patriarchal and colonial systems. This empathy facilitates an understanding of the trauma experienced by individuals, thereby dismantling physical, emotional, and cultural boundaries. The dissolution of these boundaries is presented as a component of global connectivity, reflecting an ecofeminist vision of unity, care, and coexistence in the face of global challenges.

Ma remains silent and hesitates to meet people who come to console her. She even hesitates to face her son and daughter, wishing to spend some time alone. This withdrawal mirrors the ecofeminist understanding of trauma as embodied and deeply connected to both emotional and environmental dislocation. It is only when Sid presents Ma with the cane that holds butterflies of multiple colours that Ma starts to wake up from the resistance that holds her. The butterflies, as natural symbols of transformation and renewal, reinforce ecofeminist imagery where nature becomes an agent of healing rather than domination.

Tomb of Sand depicts a strong female character by portraying her transformation from a traumatized woman to a confident and articulate woman. By addressing trauma and healing as both sides of the same coin, *Tomb of Sand* serves as both a mirror reflecting the challenges faced by Partition survivors while guiding readers toward a legacy of strength, hope, ecological consciousness, and transformation amidst haunting flashbacks.

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Anita Vethia is a research scholar at The English and Foreign Languages University, Regional Campus, Lucknow. She completed her undergraduate and postgraduate studies at Miranda House, University of Delhi. There, she built a strong foundation in English literature and research methods. Her academic interests include postcolonial studies, ecofeminism, and contemporary Indian literature. She is currently researching the intersections of gender, ecology, and narrative forms in South Asian writing.

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